

# Understanding Japanese EFL learners through the “Shu Ha Ri” approach to learning in the communicative lecture theatre.

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## Contents

1. Introduction (Culture sensitive classrooms)
2. Objective
3. Methodology
4. Brief look at Confucianism
5. Comparing Japanese and Western Teaching styles
6. Definition of Japanese learning framework (Shu Ha Ri)
7. Japanese *Iaido* and English Teaching
8. Relevance of “Shu Ha Ri” to English learning in Japan  
(The Shu barrier)
9. Description of Student attitudes, learner background characteristics and the culture of “*haji*” shame
10. The “Shu” stage & questioning
  - (A) Q & A Case study (No questions asked)
  - (B) Avoidance of public opinion
  - (C) Geography and Harmony
  - (D) Value of intuition and ambiguity
  - (E) Stealing with the eyes
11. Defining the problem of language acquisition in Japanese classrooms & communicative teaching
12. Describing the key characteristics of communicative teaching
13. Adapting the communicative method for the Japanese classroom
14. Classroom teaching techniques and examples
15. A detailed classroom lesson example using (Shu Ha Ri)

## 1. Introduction (Culture sensitive classrooms)

Many ESL and EFL teaching approaches have either failed to take into account, or underestimated the influence that “culture” has on the learning process for EFL learners.

In particular, for Japanese learners, their uniquely homogenous cultural background and values have an important influence on their framework of learning and responses to differing teaching methodologies.

A lack of sensitivity to these learner backgrounds within the EFL language classroom may lead to the formulation of inappropriate teaching strategies that negatively affect the students’ proficiency in the target language.

Cultural characteristics including: hierarchy, perfection of form, concern for harmoniously fitting into the group, and the sense of shame “*haji*” has shaped learning behavior for EFL students in Japan. These values are reflected in the education system.

## 2. Objective

This paper will attempt to explain how these culturally specific Japanese learner characteristics impact on language learning and communicative language teaching in Japan by adopting the “Shu Ha Ri” approach to analyze and predict Japanese learner behavior. Furthermore,

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changes will be suggested in communicative teaching methodology to deal with the cultural uniqueness and homogeneity of Japanese university students.

### 3. Methodology

This study of language learning and teaching has been based on communicative language lectures given over semester terms to 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year EFL students in Hokkaido in the spring and fall of 2007. The students' ability level ranged from high beginner to low intermediate level in all classes. In order to aid understanding of student attitudes in class, a survey of students' opinions has been used that was taken after the initial exposure to a communicative learning approach in the first class of semester one.

At the end of the semester, a survey was also conducted on the amount of student notation during the class, and methods used by students to understand the class lecture and material.

### 4. Brief look at Confucianism

The structure of the modern Japanese education system is influenced by Confucian values of respecting and obeying one's seniors unquestioningly through the belief of their benevolence and wisdom. These values were cemented in the 400-year Edo period where social classes were acknowledged and stratified by the Tokugawa government. Despite the Meiji restoration and abolishment of the class system, modern Japanese society still places much emphasis on hierarchy, especially within the school system. Because of this, the role of the modern Japanese educator is slightly different from that of his or her Western counterpart.

### 5. Comparing Japanese and Western Teaching styles

In modern Western education, the teacher's role is a "facilitator" to provoke discussion, debate, and analytical thought. In a sense, there is 2-way

flow of communication between students and teacher. The teacher's knowledge is given freely to the students who critically analyze it. If the students question the teacher's statements, the teacher will have to defend their views - in this way both parties become involved in the transmission of knowledge through discussion. The teacher contributes new ideas to provoke thought. The students receive these ideas, but also question the information and hence learn through their questioning of the teacher. Both parties are equal in the information flow.

In Japan, however, the teacher still occupies a much higher social position than the student. Following the Confucian ideal then, it is the job of the teacher to impart knowledge to the student, and the student to receive this knowledge "unconditionally." Whereas the teacher is the active agent in the education process, the students' role is more passive. There is little reciprocation in the process and a one-way information flow results.

### 6. Definition of Japanese learning framework (Shu Ha Ri)

The best way to understand the Japanese learning style with respect to these educational differences is to examine the role of educator and student within the "Shu-Ha-Ri" learning framework. This framework has been used to describe the steps that students go through when climbing up the skill ladder from beginner level to expert level in acquiring specific skills in many of Japan's traditional arts. The process is also relevant when describing contemporary Japanese learner behavior in Education. The learning process in this framework is characterized by three stages:

#### SHU 守

The Japanese character for "Shu" has the meaning "protect, obey, or observe." At the "Shu" stage, the novice focuses on learning a set of laws or rules that form the basic structure. In learning this foundation, the student must accept

unquestioningly the rules given to them by the teacher. At this primary stage the objective is to “seek perfection” in form through obeying the rules set by the teacher. This stage is hence the embryonic stage, which sets down a foundation for future development of skills. It may take years for the novice to achieve “near mastery” before they are able to move up to the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage.

In the case of English learning, the student will be trying to come to grips with new grammar and grammatical accuracy of a sentence, or a new function that has been taught. There will be little thought given to external variables such as their language partner or the partner’s language response. Because the mind is so engaged, conversational fluency will be limited.

Therefore, the “Shu” stage lends itself more to “solo” exercises using a particular language structure such as “drill work”, or very limited pair exercises where the complexity of the partner’s response is limited. The students’ confidence can hence be built up through repetitive exercises reinforcing the new language structure.

#### HA 破

The Japanese character for “Ha” has the meaning “to collapse, break from, or break down.” Once the student is able to competently follow the rules and laws set out in the foundation, the novice will naturally move on to the second or intermediate stage “Ha”. At this stage the novice questions the rules or laws and their applicability to different sets of situations. The “Ha” stage implies a breaking away from the student’s unquestioning loyalty to the structure given to them in the first stage.

In English learning, the student will now have become more interested in the theory and principles affecting “when” and “how” they can use the grammar form or function to achieve communication. Teachers can address this type of inquiry by providing the student with a number of different role-play scenarios of limited depth. Practical application of a theory to different situations

involving a partner will aid the student in understanding the reasons behind the language function. At this stage “interaction” between the 2 partners is essential to understand the essence of the function.

#### RI 離

The Japanese character for “Ri” has the meaning “to let go, detach, or be far removed.” Exceptionally gifted students may one day reach “Ri”, which is the final stage in their learning. At the “Ri” stage, the student, who has now become as competent as the teacher, is able to draw on their own experiences to adapt intuitively to changing circumstances. The set of rules that they once followed no longer binds their behavior. The student can let go of the system. By functioning intuitively outside the system, adaptation to external environmental variables is greatly accelerated. This leads the “Ri” stage student to become a natural master of the skills he or she has learnt.

In English learning, this means that the student will have gained insights into the meaning of the basic principles (functions) and clocked up experience in the application of these principles to a number of different scenarios. The student’s exposure to a wide range of role-play scenarios with different parameters will increase the breadth and depth of understanding with respect to the language function. Intuitive understanding of how to use the function relative to the social context of the situation will translate into a smoother and more natural language encounter. The language student will be able to react without pre-meditation to sudden language contingencies. The structure, represented by learnt forms is discarded. Complete “freedom of the mind” will result in the freedom to adapt efficiently to changing circumstances. The student will have become an adept at their particular skills.

The disregard for “form” through its mastery, and the effect of freeing up the conscious mind—“*mushin* 無心” in order to improve performance and efficiencies is also a common goal of many

contemporary learning activities.

It goes without saying however, that initially obedience to “form” is needed before it can be discarded. The method of teaching must be evenly matched to the ability level of the learner, and that the teaching method must change when the ability level of the learner changes. There can be no efficiencies if a beginning level student at “Shu” is asked to perform at expert level “Ri”. This would be like giving a first time pilot a jumbo jet and asking him to fly it. In the opposite case, for example, giving the expert pilot at “Ri” a tight structure of rules “Shu” and then asking him to maintain his flight efficiencies by basing his behavior solely on these rules will also result in negative efficiencies.

In linguistics, the 3 stages of “Shu Ha Ri” may be also experienced by the learner over a short period of time such as one lesson, or over a long period of time in many learning sessions. The learner may even experience concentric circles of “Shu Ha Ri” within Shu say, or if they are intermediate, then circles of Shu, Ha, and Ri within the wider framework of “Ha.” Everything is dependant on matching the progression in ability of the learner with the teaching structure.

Furthermore, although ability determines the stage of learning that the student operates at, the student’s ability is not set in a vacuum. The learner’s ability and how fast they progress through the three stages may be influenced by such intangibles as: past learning experiences, their attitudes towards learning, personal values, and most importantly their cultural background.

Good examples of the “Shu Ha Ri” three stage learning process can be found in many of Japan’s traditional arts such as the tea ceremony, *iaido*, *kendo* and *karate-do*. Through concentrating on the structure of the art the students that practice these arts gain intuitive insights into the art that help their learning processes. However, mastery of the new skills may take a lifetime due to the special emphasis Japanese attach to “perfection of form.”

## 7. Japanese *Iaido* and English Teaching

Language learning in Japan is far removed from the traditional arts, however, the steps that the learner progresses through to become proficient and the levels of interaction of the learner with their environment are similar. Therefore, in order to better understand Japanese learners and their background, and improve learning efficiencies and teaching strategies in the language classroom, this study will compare learning stages in just one of Japan’s traditional arts “*iaido*” to English teaching, and demonstrate the applicability of the “Shu Ha Ri” approach to explain both processes.

*Iaido* is the traditional Japanese art of sword drawing. Whereas the student of *iaido* starts with a sword form called a “*kata*” and focuses on the body mechanics to master the *kata*, the student of English in Japan generally starts with grammatical laws or rules and wields them to produce sentences and utterances. The student of *iaido* must anticipate and adapt his sword forms to the movements of another fencer. The English student must change and adapt his or her language responses to the language used by another English speaker. If this happens, then there will be an exchange. In both cases, if the student focuses too much on their own form (mechanical or grammatical) without taking into account their environment (another fencer, or another English speaker) there will be a loss in the ability to change and adapt, which will mean that the process breaks down. For the language learner, language exchange will be impossible.

## 8. Relevance of “Shu Ha Ri” to English learning in Japan

### (The Shu barrier)

Teaching and learning of English as a foreign language at schools and universities in Japan generally follows the “Shu Ha Ri” framework. However, one big problem encountered is that both the teachers and students appear to be stuck in stage 1, “Shu.” The students are unable to

proceed up the competence ladder to stage 2 “Ha” (intermediate level), or stage 3 “Ri” (advanced level), which is the intuitive stage. There are several reasons for this.

First, English teaching in Japan has followed the traditional grammar approach. Grammatical rules to describe the English language are taught over giving students experiences that can develop their own mastery in the communicative usage of the language. These two approaches could be described as “descriptive vs. experiential.”

The descriptive approach to language learning firmly anchors the student in stage one “Shu” because they have no chances to practice or confirm the correctness of their language usage with their peers. Because they lack this basic experience it is difficult for them to adapt these grammatical rules to various scenarios or language encounters outside the classroom. They are totally reliant on the teacher as the basis for all of their language learning.

Ideally, the experiential approach on the other hand, found in communicative teaching methodology gives the students chances to test their language. These experiences can lead the student from stage one, to stage 2 and finally stage 3 (intuitive use of the language) to develop a high level of fluency in the target language.

However, boosting Japanese students up to higher levels of fluency and proficiency found in stage two and three runs into difficulties because of the homogenous types of cultural beliefs that the Japanese EFL learner brings with them into the classroom.

## 9. Description of student attitudes, learner background characteristics and the culture of “*haji*” shame

### The problem defined:

In comparison to Western and even other Asian EFL learners, Japanese students bring with them

a unique set of learner attitudes, values and cultural beliefs, which sometimes hinders them in their EFL encounters inside and outside of the classroom.

Typical Japanese students have been perceived by Western teachers to be “shy” and introspective. Despite their many years learning English grammar (false beginners) they lack the confidence and experience to utilize the grammar they have learned in oral language encounters inside and outside of the classroom. The Japanese student is afraid of making mistakes in front of his/her peers. This affects the student’s willingness to volunteer information in the classroom. Furthermore, as the Japanese language itself is predominantly a visual language, most Japanese learners are by nature, visual learners. They cope with difficulty when asked to focus on oral communication skills in a foreign language.

At the beginning of the year the “communication English” students were given a class survey after their initial exposure to communicative learning in the first class of the year. The initial class was student centered, contained pair work exercises designed to make the students interact with each other in English, and focused on introducing cultural elements such as body language into the communication process. The assumption has been made that most students had a high school background in English, and that their high school English followed the grammar approach to language learning. This approach focuses on reading and writing, but little listening or speaking. The following responses after their initial class give some indication of the Japanese students’ introspective language learning behavior before the class, and the value of student centered classes, which can “motivate” the students to take a more pro-active interest in language learning.

In a survey conducted on April 18, 2007, student comments included the following:

- In your class there were many chances to have

English conversation so I think it's great if I can take advantage of this to talk more in English.

I want to use English as a tool.

- The use of body language was so interesting !!
- It was very enjoyable. I want you to teach me about Australian culture and everyday conversation
- Very Very interesting class !!
- This lecture was very interesting. I want to get used to English

- Surprise !!!!

- Feel so good !

- I had a great time. It was my first time to speak in English and I thought it was really enjoyable. Although it was difficult, it was interesting. I am envious that the teacher has so many interests.

- Although the class had a lot of tension I think I was able to enjoy the lecture. I think Japanese people are shy and don't use much body language.

- This class is very exciting !

- It was deeply interesting to find out the differences in etiquette between Japan and foreign countries. Although I'm not confident with my English I want to do my best to study daily English conversation. Please help me.

- This class is interesting. In fact, I don't like English. Because when I was High school student, I study English writing. Thank you.

- I'm looking forward to your class. See you next week.

It could be drawn from these sample responses to a communicative English lesson that:

- (1) The student's intrinsic interest was generated because the students could use language as a tool to actively participate in the lesson with their partner.
- (2) Demonstrating cultural differences: including body language and etiquette stimulated the students' interest because it helped them better understand "real" Western people.

(3) English writing was not interesting due to the difficulty of its grammatical nature.

(4) Student motivation was positively affected when the students learnt the importance of the "social environment" affecting language usage and speaker behavior.

(5) The experiential approach positively affects student motivation more than the descriptive approach to English.

(6) A lack of confidence in English can be attributed to lack of experience at using English in a communicative way and a high degree of difficulty in learning English grammar.

### 10. The "Shu" stage and questioning

Questioning techniques are a typical strategy used by Western language teachers to check student understanding during class. If a typical English language class is taken as an example, the teacher will offer many opportunities at each stage of the lesson for the students to question the material. This ensures that the weaker students are caught and can be helped before the lesson progresses to more complex tasks and materials.

However, the typical questioning techniques used by EFL teachers are ineffectual in Japan because the Japanese students fail to respond, relying more on their peers to aid understanding than the teacher. It can be said that the failure to question the teacher in Japan, is indicative of the Japanese student's learning passivity, when they are compared to the more aggressive Western learner. Student behavior in typical low intermediate level EFL language classes can provide us with a good example of this.

#### (A) Q&A Case study (No questions asked)

A case study of one large university English class tends to support the above statement.

- (1) In this study done of a large communicative English class of approximately 35 students, throughout the class, not one student asked questions to confirm their understanding of the material. This was despite the fact that 1/5 of the class still had not fully understood

the language task assigned to them (when asked) and so could not use it in the correct fashion to communicate with their partner. The same class (Communication English III ab) was given a survey asking them what they did if they ran into difficulties in understanding the lesson. 40% of the class of 35 students answered that they would ask their seniors or friends for help. 20% answered that they would do nothing, and only 25% responded that they would seek help from the teacher. 14.3% of the students responded that they would try to work out the material by themselves.

### **(B) Avoidance of public opinion**

- (2) It could be said that Japanese students are not confident language users when compared to their Western counterparts. More often than not they appear withdrawn and “shy.” One remedy used in many Western ESL classes to boost student’s confidence is to have the students practice a language function with their partner first, before selecting students to demonstrate their proficiency in front of the class. However, when this technique was used with a 2<sup>nd</sup> year English communication class in Japan, many students were unwilling to demonstrate their English in front of the class despite having practiced the particular language structure with their partner beforehand.

This perceived “shyness” by the language instructor is really the result of no single individual trait, but the whole collective group dynamic. Justification of the reticent behavior of Japanese students can be given by arguing that Japanese students are more sensitive to criticism than their Western counterparts. This leads them to take fewer risks than Western students and volunteer less information so that they are not subject to ridicule by the group. Volunteering less information means that the students’ weaknesses in language cannot be exploited. The risk of offending another member in their student group is also reduced while group harmony is maintained.

### **(C) Geography and Harmony**

This behavior may be puzzling to a Western audience until the roots of Japanese culture are examined. The Japanese value “harmony” over conflict, and group consensus over the voicing of any one individual opinion. This need for harmony can be traced back to geography. Japan is a relatively small island with a large population and few resources. Being spread over a number of conjoining tectonic plates, it is a country fraught with volcanism and earthquakes.

This has necessitated the population living close together using perishable building resources. Individual privacy has been restricted, and for that reason is highly valued. An intuitive language focusing on courtesy and mutual respect has been developed as a result of this. In every day life, because the danger of offending others is so great, “cooperation” within the group is emphasized to such an extent that the individual members will hold back their own opinions in favor of “group opinion” to maintain group harmony. Evidence of this behavior can be found these days in the strong attachment of the individual to his or her company group and the need to seek peer approval before making decisions. Traditional industries such as rice cultivation also demonstrate extensive cooperative behavior. Farmers work in close quarters with each other on small plots of land, so a great deal of cooperation is also necessary when planting the rice. A high degree of sensitivity to one’s neighbors ensures a productive harvest.

### **(D) Value of intuition and ambiguity**

Another reason for students’ hesitancy to speak lies in the Japanese language, which is very ambiguous. Often sentences are not completed and the listener has to guess the intentions of the speaker. “Intuition” is valued over directly stating what one’s thoughts and opinions are, which to a Japanese person would be seen as somewhat childish. The Japanese have several words for this, such as “*aimai*” and “*honomekasu*.” Both words refer to vague, subtle and non-committal language that is used when the speaker wishes to

respect what the other person is saying whilst maintaining the group harmony.

This is the norm for etiquette in Japanese conversations, where body language becomes much more important than the noncommittal language used by the speaker. In its extreme form, the subtleties of Japanese communication have evolved into a non-verbal form of communication. This is called “*ishin-denshin*”, which means “heart to heart communication.” The Japanese are able to communicate solely through a combination of body language and intuition. To the Western mind, it seems paradoxical because in a sense it appears to be “communication without communication” and the experience could be likened to a kind of “telepathy.” These strategies are social phenomena that can be found operating in the spoken language between Japanese. However they do not pay off in the Western communicative classroom where explicit verbal communication, and the stating of one’s opinions is the key to learning.

### **(E) Stealing with the eyes**

(3) Another challenge to teaching oral communication is that Japanese students are visual learners. By and large the students discount blackboard prompts as starters and focus on the activity of writing rather than of speaking. Copying down in written form everything, including the exact words and examples of the teacher appeared to be more important than actually becoming involved in the assigned task, which was the conversation itself.

A survey of the class also confirmed these “Shu” stage symptoms. Despite the fact that it was an oral communication class, 25% of the class responded in a survey that they took copious notes. Another 34% responded that they took an adequate amount of notes. Only 5.7% of the students responded that they did not take many notes and 17.5% said that they sometimes took a few notes.

## **11. Defining the problem of language acquisition in Japanese classrooms & communicative teaching**

Many theories of language acquisition have been advanced over time from the grammatical approach at one end of the spectrum, to the functional-notional approach, humanist approach and communicative approach at the other end of the spectrum. All theories are valid and appeal to different types of students. There is no be-all or end all theory.

However, it has been found that a certain degree of communication between students using an expression or structure reinforces the language function and helps the student better understand its usage and context of usage through direct peer feedback by way of a verbal response. If the usage is correct then the student will get a positive response. A conversation will be initiated. If the usage is incorrect then there may be no response or, in pair work, the partner will be able to communicate that they cannot understand the question. Whichever the case, feedback leads to immediate evaluation of whether or not the language has been used in the correct fashion.

Most importantly, pair practice also helps the learner to understand the correct “social context” of the language. An English learner who is fully versed in grammar, but has had no opportunities to test the social appropriateness of the language may run into big trouble when they try to communicate with another English speaker for the first time. This is a major problem experienced by Japanese students who have spent 5 or more years under the grammar based system currently employed in high schools.

### **The communicative approach & partner sensitivity**

In the communicative approach then, language acquisition can only be achieved through pair or group work. The student initiating the conversation must listen to their partner’s response (grammar, expressions, and intonation used) in order to



continue the conversation. Unlike drill practice, which is a solo activity, the partner’s participation is absolutely essential in the conversation. Sensitivity to the partner and his/her response will lead to a smoothly flowing conversation.

However, in the Japanese language class, a big problem encountered is the lack of sensitivity to the language partner. Because students are stuck in the “Shu stage” they tend to focus on the “form” of their message, while neglecting to listen to the “response” from their partner. This is because the Japanese student has learnt to value accuracy over fluency. Marathon attempts at establishing 100% accuracy mean that the student stops at the form and discounts the fluency.

Therefore, the question must be asked “Is 100% grammatical accuracy necessary for communication?” The answer is “no.” The message does not have to be 100% accurate for the students to understand and reply to it. This is the big pitfall for Japanese EFL learners who think that they must perfect the message before initiating the conversation.

The exact opposite is also true for those Japanese learners who are afraid to speak out when confronted by an English speaking situation. Because there is the possibility of making many grammar mistakes if a full sentence is constructed, the student goes in the opposite direction and only responds with one-word answers.

For example, if the native speaker’s question is “Where are you going tonight?” and the Japanese response to this is “concert.” Then the student has answered the question, while overcoming the problems caused by grammatical mistakes if a full sentence were constructed. The Japanese student has solved their dilemma. To another English learner or Japanese English student the meaning is quite clear. However, to a native speaker the sentence sounds quite broken, and the listener may ask for clarification. Therefore, two questions can be asked:

- (1) Why is it that Japanese students are so afraid of making mistakes in class in front of their peers?
- (2) What needs to be done to overcome the Japanese student’s reluctance to volunteer information?

If one were to look for a cultural answer to the first question, then the “*haji*” aspect of Japanese culture would have to be examined. “*Haji*” in English has the meaning “shame.” The Japanese have traditionally been hypersensitive to what their neighbors think of them. This has already been explained in their need to maintain group harmony and not stand out too much. However the second important reason is the fear of “shaming” themselves in front of their neighbors.

“Shame” is a big motivator determining behavior in Japan. Shame and its taboo have been used by Japanese society to control individual behavior ever since childhood. One example here is the tight segregation between men and women in Japan. Starting from childhood, boys were conditioned to keep with boys, and girls were conditioned to play with girls. In the classroom, even the university classroom, where there is an even number of men and women, all of the young men will sit in one part of the room, and the women will sit together in another part of the room. This segregation is also apparent in communicative pair work activities and role-play scenarios, even when both sexes are prompted by the teacher to work together. There is no mixing of the sexes because Japanese society has tended to keep the sexes segregated until marriage. Young people are frowned on if they mix too much with the opposite sex. The fear of ridicule from other class members will also stop students from volunteering information in class or volunteering long responses to questions asked of them.

In summary, the key characteristics used to describe Japanese learners in this essay have been a hesitancy to talk, a fear of making mistakes, a fear of ridicule, safety in the group, and a strong

focus on form - represented by more emphasis being placed on grammatical accuracy over communicative fluency. These characteristics firmly anchor the student at the beginning stage “Shu” and present a large hurdle for a language class focusing on communication. However theories of communicative teaching can provide us with a few clues on how to deal with these types of students and accelerate them to the more advanced stages of learning, “Ha” the intermediate stage, and “Ri” the advanced stage.

## 12. Describing the key characteristics of communicative teaching

The main characteristics of communicative language teaching, which produce a more intrinsically motivated student could be summarized into the following categories:

- (1) **Student motivation:** Firstly, it is important to motivate the students to “want to” participate in class. Motivation can be affected by the kinds of materials the instructor uses: authentic materials or real life materials are more interesting than a dry textbook. If the teacher and students share some personal experiences with each other the class also becomes more interesting.
- (2) **Student centered classroom:** In the communicative classroom it is the students who should be doing the communicating, not the teacher. The teacher’s role is to act as a facilitator. This means that the teacher sets up role plays or scenarios where the students can practice using the language functions taught with their partner. Students learn how to use new expressions or functions and when to use them in situations.
- (3) **Group work / pair work:** Large classes are difficult for the traditional language teacher because of the lack of time the students get talking to the teacher. In the communicative classroom the students are encouraged to use each other as language resources by working in pairs or small groups to practice language functions.
- (4) **Communication is ability based:** In the communicative classroom the students communicate within their ability level with other students. This means that they utilize what they know to talk to other students.
- (5) **Use of authentic materials:** If the teacher brings to class real life materials such as a real train time table, or a real restaurant menu it increases the students’ enthusiasm because the students realize the usefulness of their class time, i. e., they will be able to use the language functions outside the class in the real world.
- (6) **Focus on fluency over accuracy:** This means that the students should try to talk to one another even if their vocabulary or grammatical accuracy is limited. The students’ sentences do not have to be 100% grammatically correct for them to get across the meaning of what they want to say to their peers. In the communicative classroom making mistakes is a learning experience that is not threatening.
- (7) **Active student participation required:** Another key characteristic of the communicative classroom is the active involvement of the students. Because pair work or group work is the norm, students will not have a passive role, like in a typical lecture theatre. They should be actively talking to their peers and getting feedback on their own language use from both their peers and the teacher who acts as a facilitator.
- (8) **Positive attitude to learning:** In the communicative classroom making mistakes is a learning experience that is not life threatening. Students should be encouraged to use communication strategies to help verify information when they do not understand the message. Furthermore, they should be encouraged to look on “mistakes” as a chance to improve their language skills or expand their vocabulary.

## 13. Adapting the communicative method for the Japanese classroom

Communicative language teaching is created to get the students actively using the language func-

tion with their peers for immediate feedback. Because the students are actively participating in the lesson they become highly motivated language learners. The key characteristics described above work in most EFL classrooms. However, these EFL communicative teaching strategies have to be modified somewhat when teaching a class of Japanese EFL learners who are used to using the descriptive, grammatical approach to language learning over the more “hands on” communicative approach.

One strategy to use, catering for the low intermediate level EFL students is to have all of the elements of “Shu”, “Ha”, and “Ri” incorporated into 1 lesson. Therefore, instead of solely using a grammar approach with its rigid structure, or solely using a communicative approach, which is more flexible but difficult for beginners to grasp, a combination of the two is needed.

For low intermediate students, the “new” communicative approach must be introduced slowly and in deliberate stages. Ideally the stages could look something like this:

1. A Structure with laws or rules or a language function establishing a foundation for beginners. (Shu)
2. Small pair work activities that give students the chance to practice a variety of grammatical laws & functions with each other. These exercises are designed to elicit responses from the student’s partners in mini scenarios. (mini role-plays) (Ha)
3. In-depth role-plays or group-work activities that allow students to holistically draw on their total language ability and adapt their language to different situations. (Ri) In-depth role-plays also provide opportunities for students to experience and understand the socio-cultural context of their language usage.

The small group activities will ideally give students experience at dealing with different situations where they will have to change the language that they use to communicate. The lan-

guage changes may occur in function, level of politeness, or even in intonation, depending on whom the student is speaking to and when and where the situation is happening.

Next, for a smooth transition between the three stages of the lesson, a fundamental change in students’ attitudes towards language learning must be encouraged right from the first lesson.

First, students need to be taught that language is different to mathematics in that it is not set in stone. Language is fluid and will change depending on the circumstances.

Second, and just as important, students must understand that 100% accuracy in language use is not needed for effective communication. “Getting the gist of what is said” and “communicating the gist of one’s needs” is more than enough for a successful language encounter.

Finally, students must look upon making mistakes “positively” as a learning experience. The more mistakes the students make with their language, the faster they will be able to improve their English by drawing on new vocabulary, expressions and new understandings of when and where and how to use the language.

Once the “fear” of making mistakes has been eliminated, the students will find it easier to move onto stage two or “Ha” in the learning process. The “Ha” stage presents students with many mini role-plays or scenarios to give them functional experience with the language. Once they have accumulated a large amount of experience using the language in different contexts then they are ready to move up to “Ri” where intuitive use of language is the key for effective communication.

#### 14. Classroom teaching techniques and examples

##### SHU 守

At the “Shu” stage the students will be learning new vocabulary, new language functions and they

will be told when and how to use the language. It is imperative to teach “communicative strategies” to the students in this early stage to improve their confidence at language usage and develop strategies that they can access if they run into problems in communicating with their partner. For example, many Japanese students “freeze up” or refrain from responding to their partner or another English speaker if they realize that they have made a mistake or do not understand what their partner has said. The Japanese EFL teacher can turn this weakness into a learning opportunity by including the following strategies in the curriculum:

“Sorry, could you repeat that please?”  
 “I’m sorry but I don’t understand.”  
 “Could you speak a little slower please?”  
 “What does ..... mean?”  
 How do you say “.....” in English?

The students could deliberately be given language by their partner, or a teacher that they cannot understand. They could then be prompted to practice using the above strategies. Repetition of this process will build confidence. If the students are encouraged to use these strategies in the first few classes then it should become a good habit in helping them acquire more language.

Next, the teacher must ensure that their lesson is accessing the “visual learners” (who are the great majority of class) through referral to written text that supports verbal commands and oral activities in class. For example, the teacher could use the blackboard, projector or Powerpoint software more than usual throughout the lesson. At the beginning of the lesson the teacher could write a question or sentence on the board that is related to the lesson’s function to warm up the student. The students would then ask each other this question. If the teacher is reading a dialogue and asking comprehension questions about the dialogue to the students, the teacher should also write the comprehension questions on the board, and not just rely on verbal questioning techniques. Having the question in

front of them on the board allows the students to find hints or clues in the grammar of the question, which can help them to respond to it using similar grammar. This advantage is lost if the question is just verbal.

“Choral repetition” of key phrases or words that are written on the board should not be overlooked for beginners because it builds confidence. It also captures those students with ineffective pronunciation. Many Japanese students have trouble with sounds such as “a, v and b, th and s, r and l” these sounds should be emphasized when they appear in the lessons phrases, functions or new vocabulary through repetition. A visual example of the way to move the mouth could also provide feedback on how to use the tongue to pronounce the sounds and lightens the atmosphere of the class somewhat.

## HA 破

Once the function has been taught and intonation and pronunciation practiced then it is time to move on to the second stage in the lesson “Ha.”

It has been said that the purpose of this stage is to build experience at using the function while having “on the spot” feedback from the student’s partners. It is obviously a good idea to have the students work in pairs or small groups. This will overcome their tendency to be shy or hesitant to speak. Their partner is a much more friendly face to deal with than the whole classes or even the teachers. Pair work allows students to give feedback to their partner in terms of a verbal response on whether or not the communication has been effective. The pair work or small group work strategy also allows the teacher to move around large lecture theatres and help many students on the spot while they are communicating with their partner. A teacher-dominated lesson simply does not work (for communicative learning) in a lecture theatre of 40 or 50 students.

Next, an advantage of the communicative approach is the real life material that is brought into the classroom and used by the teacher. This

is fine if they are intermediate or advanced students. However for the beginning students “real life material” may be too difficult for the student to understand in the short amount of time available for them to use it in class. In this case, the teacher must either “selectively” choose authentic material to use in class, or adapt authentic material enough so that the students can understand it. Selectively choosing material is the best option. There is nothing better to promote interest in a Japanese EFL class than to use “real life” material that they may encounter in the outside world. This approach contrasts sharply with the usual dry textbooks that the students are used to using in high schools and may motivate them more. “Motivation” is one key to developing effective language learning after high school.

The student’s intrinsic motivation can be increased by a variety of factors.

It has already been said that pair work and small group work should be encouraged at the “Shu” and “Ha” stages. Role-plays can be an effective tool for teaching language function and usage if the situation that is set up by the teacher is an “everyday” situation that the students may encounter outside the classroom. Bringing the “real world” into the classroom will demonstrate for the students the “usefulness” of the language that they are learning.

As a society Japan has traditionally attached much emphasis on the “*gambaru seishin*” or spirit of perseverance. In martial arts this means to persevere in one’s endeavor, no matter what the cost. A good example of this is found in the Japanese expression “*ishi no ue ni mo san nen*” which could be translated as “three years on a rock.” (This tells the story of Buddha who sat for three years on a rock in order to obtain enlightenment.)

In the classroom this translates into hard work. It is true that perseverance is a positive virtue. Many students will need this virtue to undertake the mammoth task of learning a foreign language. However, in the EFL classroom hard work is not

enough. One key variable that has been lost in the Japanese culture of perseverance and austerity is “fun.” The lesson must be fun! For the purposes of this essay, “fun” refers to any material or activities that will stimulate the students’ interest in learning. This does not just mean “games.”

Intrinsically interesting material is material that has functional applications outside the classroom, or material that brings up current issues that the students can relate to in their social group. For example, the material may contain activities that access the student’s own experiences and draw on these experiences in a conversation. These activities could be group survey’s, discussions about sports, TV, movies, or music, as well as role-play scenarios that accurately reflect situations that students may come across outside the classroom in the “real world.”

The final variable to affect motivation is “group work.” All facets of Japanese society are arranged around the group. However, the Japanese group can be broken up into its two parts: the insiders (incumbent members), and the outsiders (new members trying to get in). Unfortunately, the Japanese version of “the group” is not very kind to outsiders. This is an obstacle to a language classroom that encourages pair work and group work activities. In a typical language classroom there will always be some students (sometimes bright students) that have been rejected by the group collective for some reason or other. However, solo learning is only the avenue of a grammar lesson. In the communicative classroom these students cannot be left out of the lesson. They could be helped through a variety of basic strategies:

- (1) Physically placing them into pairs (moving them across the room to a partner), or placed into the larger group.
- (2) Peer tutoring can help to motivate and involve these students in the lesson. They could also be actively encouraged to join a group or create their own group for partner activities.
- (3) Group/pair introduction and class survey exer-

cises may get these loner students to open up to the other students. Once they have become familiar with other class members it makes it easier for them to be accepted as an “insider.”

## RI 離

At the final stage of the lesson “Ri”, the students are given an in-depth role-play where they must call on all of their total language experience to complete a task. This situation should be flexible enough so that the teacher can change key variables in the situation, which will affect the types of language used by the students. Providing a variety of situations will allow the students to draw on their entire English experience and ability in a variety of different language encounters. This will build the student’s intuitive use of the language - as it is this “intuitive use” that is the end goal of the language class.

The second reason for including role-plays at the Ri stage is that the role-play, which artificially creates situations that might occur in the real world, takes the students’ language use out of a vacuum and places it in an appropriate socio-cultural context. This is important, for as in the real world many variables (socio-cultural) apart from the language function itself affect the type of language, and the way in which it is used in a language exchange between speakers. For example, the time of day, when the speakers are meeting, the speakers’ status in relation to each other, their job, gender and reason for their meeting, etc. all affect the language that is used. These variables do exist and are not void or even static as some grammatical approaches to language learning assume.

## 15. A detailed classroom lesson example using (Shu Ha Ri)

An example of a typical lesson following the three tier “Shu Ha Ri” approach is as follows: The lesson objective was to teach students how to give directions and follow directions that they may need if seeking out services while living or traveling overseas. The lesson began with a

conversation starter that was written in the middle of the board. Students were divided into pairs and told to ask their partner the following two questions:

“Have you ever been lost? What happened?”

This exercise was designed to:

1. Get the students’ attention
2. Elicit personal experiences in order to capture their interest in the lesson right from the beginning.
3. Decentralize the class so that the students could use English as a tool to access their partners’ experiences.
4. Allow the teacher the freedom to walk around accessing, monitoring and giving feedback to pairs of students in the class.

After the starter, the first stage was initiated:

## SHU

1. The teacher wrote down a list of directions (vocabulary) on the board. The directions were also illustrated with a primitive map.
2. The teacher checked pronunciation by having the students repeat the list of directions.
3. The teacher checked for understanding by asking if there were any questions.
4. The teacher verified whether or not the students understood the directions by giving a practical example, i. e., the teacher gave a blackboard eraser to a random student and then asked that student to place the blackboard eraser somewhere in the room (usually near another student) using directional vocabulary. This would test the students’ listening ability and practical application of the vocabulary. This was repeated a number of times until all of the vocabulary had been checked.

## HA

At the second stage the students were given a real life map of a “local” area listing some essential services.

1. The teacher introduced the appropriate function needed to ask directions, i. e., “Excuse me, can you tell me how to get to ...?”
2. The students formed pairs. In their pairs they had to take turns asking each other how to get

to places on the map. The places chosen on the map reflected all of the directional grammar taught previously with the eraser example. Each activity was designed around asking directions to just one service or location on the map. The pair work partners had to access the map in order to use the function to give directions to each other.

3. The pairs changed roles from adviser to direction asker and direction asker to adviser. This stage allowed the teacher to travel between the pairs, check whether the students were asking directions in the appropriate way, and give feedback to individual groups.
4. The teacher brought up certain problematic situations (that some groups had) on the blackboard. The teacher asked the class as a whole how to get to the certain problematic places. This was designed to check the class understanding as a whole, and was also used as an opportunity to introduce new grammar or vocabulary, and reinforce language needed for difficult situations.
5. The teacher brought up appropriate communication strategies when it was found that some students were lapsing into Japanese while they were pondering the map. For example, “Let me see”, “Hm”, “I’m sorry I don’t know” and “I’m sorry I can’t help you” were substituted for the Japanese expressions found to be used by the Japanese students such as “*Eeto...*”, “*UUUunnnnn*”, and “*wakaranai...*”
6. Sometimes, when the task was a difficult one and the directions to get to a place were very complex, one of the partners was found using sign language such as “the index finger was held up”, or they said in Japanese “*Wakarani, moo ichido...*” meaning “one more time” to communicate that they couldn’t follow the directions. In this case the teacher used it as an opportunity to introduce new expressions to make the communication process smoother, e. g., “I’m sorry. I didn’t catch all that. Could you say that again please?”

RI

1. The students were broken into pairs.

2. The pairs were given an “in depth” role-play and individuals in the pair grouping were assigned a role.
3. The role specified the relationship between the two people, and a detailed list of services that one of the students would need to ask directions for. Other information that had a bearing on this task was also introduced, such as the opening and closing times of certain shops or services, and the distance involved to the places.
4. Students questioned their partner to find out the above information. They then changed roles and performed the situation once again while the teacher was moving around listening to individual pairs and giving feedback to the pairs.
5. Certain parameters of the role-play (services sought, opening closing times, money carried) were modified and it was repeated once again.
6. At the end of the class the teacher played one role and the whole class played the other role - to double check the students understanding.

By the end of the class it was found that students were quite comfortable using the function in their groups to ask and give each other directions. The decentralized nature of the class (where students were not selected to stand up in front of their peers) and the authenticity of the material used (local maps) had a positive effect on student confidence and motivation. The fact that the students could access communication strategies when they did not understand the vocabulary or directions given to them ensured a smoother communication process. This also positively affected confidence and student attitudes to learning.

**Conclusion:** Understanding the cultural background of a learner group can help teachers better adapt and formulate an appropriate communication method to aid in language acquisition for EFL learners in Japan. When studying English, Japanese EFL learners encounter obstacles in the form of: learner attitude, shyness, a hesitancy to talk, a fear of making mistakes, a fear of ridicule, group discrimination, and a focus on structure

(grammatical accuracy over communicative fluency.) It has been suggested that these impediments to language acquisition may be overcome first through understanding the cultural roots of these factors, and secondly, through changing the learner's basic attitude towards language study. A three tiered approach is suggested, in conjunction with class management techniques emphasizing pair work and student centered-small group work exercises and role-plays to build language confidence and experience at a variety of different language encounters. The three-tier approach fosters "intuitive language use" as its end product.

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## 要約 Summary:

“Learner culture” is an important variable that must be taken into account to maximize learning outcomes in the EFL classroom. Japanese learners have a uniquely homogenous cultural background that influences their learning process. Cultural variables such as: hierarchy, perfection of form, group harmony and “*haji*”, the sense of shame, present obstacles to effective communicative learning in Japan. This study will provide a three stage model “Shu Ha Ri” to analyze and predict Japanese learner behavior in the EFL classroom. Teaching strategies emphasizing pair work, student-centered small group-work activities and role-plays are suggested to address the unique Japanese learning process.